Read an excerpt from Eliot Peper's new science fiction thriller, Bandwidth

A couple of years ago, I read *Cumulus*, a self-published book by Eliot Peper. The novel follows three characters in a near-future San Francisco, which is divided into a super-wealthy tech elite and the downtrodden customers who use their services. It's an engaging satire of Silicon Valley, and it put Peper on my radar.

In May, Peper will publish his new book, called *Bandwidth.* It's about a near-future Mexico City lawyer named Dag Calhoun, who begins to question the world he's making by representing high-powered tech and energy executives. When he's almost killed in a drive-by shooting, he discovers that a group of activists have been hijacking digital feeds to manipulate public opinion and global markets, and revealing their existence could destroy the system he's helped create.

Here's an excerpt from the book, which hits stores on May 1st, 2018.

Dag Calhoun sipped his third macchiato and considered that fickle bitch, power. The creamy sweetness of the steamed milk cut the earthy acidity of the espresso. A solo bassist plucked jazzy scales in the café behind him. A balmy spring breeze ruffled Dag's thick brown hair, the gust an unexpected blessing in this country ravaged by the twin specters of drought and violence.

From his seat at one of the sidewalk tables, Dag gazed at the professional dog walkers escorting the pampered pets of Mexico City's elite. The park across the street was one of the verdant oases that made the wealthy La Condesa neighborhood feel completely isolated from the rest of the hustling

megalopolis. Dapper professionals strode back from lunch meetings as preschoolers in color-coded smocks clustered around teachers in the dappled green shade.

History was badly plotted and written by committee. It lacked the narrative structure, moral fiber, and cathartic transformation that even the crassest feed serials took for granted. Visiting Distrito Federal never failed to remind him of the delicate, capricious cascade of events that had shaped the geopolitical fortunes of the Americas. That was why he was here after all, to rest a finger on the scale, to give history a nudge in the right direction. Or in his client's direction anyway.

Sighing, Dag took another sip. Sometimes there was nothing for it but to revel in the ephemeral bliss of a perfect cup. This balanced roast teased his palate with notes of blackberry, tamarind, and maple sugar. His feed displayed the supply chain all the way through from the estate of origin in Aceh to the local microroaster. He made a mental note to tip the barista again on the way out.

His gaze slipped back to the elderly couple seated a few tables down. The woman had lustrous skin and elegant features that hinted at Mayan heritage. Her lanky partner's high forehead, short-cropped beard, and dated-but-classy attire made Dag think he might hail from Ethiopia. But what really caught Dag's attention was their dynamic. There was too much ambient noise for him to eavesdrop, but they exuded an intimate authenticity. His earnest enthusiasm. Her lopsided smile. The attentiveness with which he stirred two spoonfuls of sugar into her coffee.

Dag selected a toothpick from the small dispenser on his table. Then he spread out a napkin and dipped the end of the toothpick into the dregs of his macchiato. With utmost care, he lowered a single drop of milky espresso to the napkin. As soon as it touched, the fibers sucked up the droplet like a

sponge. With a series of quick strokes, he used the tip of the toothpick to push, pull, and tease the liquid as it was absorbed. Then he dipped into his cup for another drop.

Trust emanated from the couple like scent off a rose. The generous, warm, unselfconscious trust that bound together people who gave more than they took. Dag tamped down a budding ache of jealousy. In his business, the vulnerability that trust required was anathema. It was a target painted on your back, a point of leverage others wouldn't hesitate to exploit. He knew, because he exploited people for a living. Ambition did not tolerate exposure.

Chewing on the toothpick, Dag admired his handiwork. The lines were blurred, edges ragged where the liquid darkened the coarse weave of paper fibers. It was as distorted as a long-forgotten black-and-white photograph, warped by age and water damage. Nevertheless, something about the couple shone through the rough medium. Though it lacked mimetic detail, the sketch captured something essential about their rapport. The corner of Dag's mouth quirked around the toothpick as he imagined the piece framed on the wall of some cosmopolitan gallery, effete hipsters hoping to impress each other by lavishing praise or ridicule on it as prevailing social conditions demanded.

Connection, coffee stain on napkin.

A shout from down the block caught Dag's attention. A golden retriever was charging up the sidewalk, big pink tongue lolling out of its mouth, leash slapping freely against the pavement with every bound. Sliding out of his seat, Dag stamped down on the end of the leash as it whipped past, whistling to the dog so that it turned toward him in time to save itself from a violent jerk to the collar. As Dag knelt to retrieve the leash, the irrepressible retriever licked his face with instant affection.

A young boy sprinted up, put his hands on his knees, and

gasped for air.

“¡Muchas gracias, señor!” he managed after a minute.

Dag handed over the leash and wiped the slobber from his face. “No se preocupe,” he said. “¿Escapar es vivir, no? Es un perro muy lindo.”

After scratching the beast’s head once more, Dag returned to his seat. It was past time. He crumpled up the napkin, tossed the toothpick, and scanned his fellow patrons. In addition to the loving elderly couple, there were a group of scruffy students working on some academic project, a pair of sleek housewives complaining about their respective au pairs, and his two bodyguards with their slick hair, tight-fitting suits, and hard eyes. They had swept this place before his arrival. And, as a matter of professional pride, Dag had arrived forty-five minutes prior to the designated meeting time. Hence the jittery thrill of overcaffeination. But the café now felt like home turf, and that slight psychological edge sometimes made all the difference in a negotiation.

There. A black SUV rounded the corner and pulled to a smooth stop in front of the café. A new duo of bodyguards emerged, heads swinging left and right, eyes hidden behind reflective sunglasses, weapons barely concealed beneath their chic blazers. Dag gave them a jaunty wave, which they ignored with professional stoicism as they cased the joint. Satisfied, one took up a position on the street corner while the other opened the back passenger door to let their employer out into the afternoon sunshine.

Federico Alvarez emerged, blinking away the glare as his eyes adjusted to the world outside the tinted cocoon of his vehicle. Once a professional soccer player, he’d let his body go to seed as his political star rose. Now not even his Italian tailor could hide his paunch. But he still moved with an athlete’s confidence, and his open face concealed his

cunning.

Dag rose and smoothed his tie.

“Federico,” he said, grinning. “I was starting to think you had been sucked into the black hole of your beautiful city’s infamous traffic.”

They shook hands and embraced.

“Oh, Dag,” said Federico with a sad shake of his head. “One day I hope you’re able to set aside your obsession with punctuality. I swear that every time I visit those United States of yours, I fear that the entire population is living on the brink of cardiac arrest thanks to their uncompromising calendars. Cálmate, amigo. Estás en México. Relájate.”

They ordered a round of coffees, Dag starting to regret the volume of his previous espresso intake, and settled into the comfortable meandering banter that preceded any weighty discussion in this particular capital. Federico’s daughter had inherited his love for the beautiful game, and he described her recent victories in lavish detail. There were rumors she was in the running for a midfielder slot on the national team. His son was completing a degree in philosophy at Oxford and upon graduation would surely enjoy a fast track into the bureaucratic elite. They commiserated over the widespread destruction the latest hurricane had left along the Yucatán peninsula and traded self-deprecating anecdotes about romantic conquests long past.

Two café au laits and a croissant later, Dag made his move.

“You know why I’m here,” he said with an apologetic shrug. “The goddess of Silicon Valley is getting anxious. She wants to see progress.”

Federico’s forehead wrinkled. “Patience, my friend. Haste does not equal efficacy.”

“As you said before, we Americans have an unhealthy preoccupation with promptness.” Dag leaned forward. “And we cannot afford to lose momentum on this initiative. It’ll transform the country, empower your constituents. Think how much better prepared residents in the Yucatán could have been, and how much faster the disaster response time could have been, if the program was in place.”

Federico was a favorite on the field and in the feed. His storied career as a striker gave his personal brand as a politician an optimistic-populist sheen. Dag liked him. Federico was gregarious and well-intentioned. But what made him key to Apex Group’s strategy was the larger narrative that Federico’s legacy fit within: the story of a new tomorrow for Mexico, working toward a brighter future rather than returning to a mythical past. That paired well with Commonwealth’s campaign to expand its full-stack service offering here. Federico was moderate enough to be taken seriously and bold enough to set things in motion.

Dag’s employer, Apex, was the premier Washington lobbying firm serving major blue-chip clients like Commonwealth. Dag had spent more than a year cultivating Federico, advising him on political strategy, shaping the finer technical points in his proposed legislation—all on Commonwealth’s dime. The return on that investment would be extending its fiber-optic tendrils into one of the few countries that maintained independent and outdated telecommunications infrastructure.

“You know I want it as much as you do.” Federico’s tone was quiet, sincere. Bass notes dribbled out of the café as thick as molasses. Dag’s heart tap-danced a caffeinated syncopation. “But you know what’s at stake here,” Federico continued. “Getting this through despite . . . them—it takes time. And money.”

Dag arched an eyebrow. “We’ve provided plenty. Even you have to admit that.”

“Sí, sí,” said Federico, drumming his fingers on the table. “Of course. I don’t mean to come across as ungrateful. But a coalition is a delicate thing, and we have to go about it slowly and carefully, lest we invite retribution. I wish it were otherwise, but—”

“I’m here to deliver an ultimatum,” interrupted Dag, impaling Federico with the glacial intensity of his pale-blue stare. “We need to find traction. This is happening, one way or the other.” He held a sympathetic smile and understanding murmurs in reserve. Land the blow, then salve the wound.

A pained expression flashed across Federico’s face before he could replace it with the politician’s mask of professional neutrality. “Okay,” he said, “I’ll do—”

But Dag was no longer paying attention.

Behind Federico, the bodyguard posted on the corner dropped into a crouch as three ancient motorbikes accelerated out of the traffic surrounding the park and onto the café’s side street, tires squealing on blacktop. Belatedly, Dag saw that each motorbike had two riders and all wore ski masks. Even as the bodyguard’s hand darted toward his holster, a staccato burst of submachine-gun fire turned him into a bloody marionette.

“Get down!” yelled Dag as the world exploded into chaos.

Bandwidth will be released on May 1st, 2018.

https://www.theverge.com/2017/12/17/16776990/eliot-peper-book-excerpt-bandwidth-science-fiction